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Krüger, Thomas

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ON THE SENSE OF BALANCE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Thomas Krüger

In this article I would like to draw attention to some passages in the Hebrew Bible that are related to the sense of balance. Within the limits of this paper, it is not possible to provide more than a brief and preliminary overview, which may inspire further, more detailed and more in-depth research.

By sense of balance (or equilibrium) I mean the sense(s) that help(s) people determine whether they sit, stand, or walk in an upright position. There are overlaps, but also differences, between the sense of balance (equilibrioception), the sense of movement (kinesthesia), and the sense of position (or position and movement: proprioception), each of which respectively covers a wider range of sense functions than the sense of balance.¹

It can be assumed that the ancient Hebrews were able to sit, to stand, and to walk in an upright position. Perhaps they would also have acknowledged the existence of something like a sense of balance, even if probably they would not have called it a sense.² To my knowledge, there is no word for sense in the Hebrew

¹ My impression is that the terms *kinesthesia* and *proprioception* are not uniformly used in the academic literature on the physiology of the senses; see, e.g., *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Human sensory reception,” <https://www.britannica.com/science/human-sensory-reception>; Frédérique de Vignemont, “Bodily Awareness,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, spring 2018 ed., plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/bodily-awareness/. Phenomenologically, the distinction between balance, movement, and bodily posture appears to be plausible and comprehensible; see, e.g., Mădălina Diaconu, *Phänomenologie der Sinne*, Grundwissen Philosophie (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2013).

² For instructive comparative cases, see Kathryn Linn Geurts, *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), esp. 71–84, 144–65; Geurts, “Consciousness as ‘Feeling in the Body’: A West African Theory of Embodiment, Emotion and the Making of the Mind,” in *Empire of the Senses*, ed. David Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 164–78. See also Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible*, LHBOTS 545 (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 75–84, Nicole L. Tilford, *Sensing World, Sensing Wisdom: The Cognitive*

Bible, like modern Hebrew חוש or טעם, maybe with the exception of Prov 31:18 (where the verb טעם may mean “perceive” or “sense”) and Job 20:2 (where the noun חוש may mean “perception” or “sense”).³

Since there is no term for “balance” in the Hebrew Bible, we have to look for descriptions of the phenomenon in the biblical texts. When we do so, it turns out that there are far more instances of someone failing to maintain balance than of someone maintaining balance without problems. If a person loses balance, they have trouble standing upright or walking straightforward. They start to sway or stagger, to reel or totter. Subsequently they may fall over, or they may regain their equilibrium.

WHY PEOPLE LOSE BALANCE

In the Hebrew Bible, the loss of balance may be caused by drunkenness or dizziness, by being on a ship in heavy swell or riding in a swaying cart, by stumbling or slipping, or by being pushed or overthrown by a snare. Two of these reasons are often mentioned together: drunkenness and heavy swell. In Prov 23:33–34 a teacher cautions his pupils against drinking too much wine by describing the annoying side effects of drunkenness:

Your eyes will see strange things,
and your mind utter perverse things.
You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea,
like one who lies on the top of a mast.
(NRSV)

A drunken person feels like a sailor in a crow’s nest. He stands on shaky ground. Everything around him sways to and fro. He becomes dizzy and loses his balance. He has trouble standing upright and walking straightforward. But in the case of the sailor in a storm everything around him actually sways to and fro, whereas the swaying is only an illusion in the case of the drunk person. He is not thrown out of balance by a swaying environment, but by a breakdown of his sense of equilibrium under the influence of alcohol, which affects not only his sense of balance but also his sense of sight (“your eyes will see strange things”) and his mind (“your mind [lit., ‘heart’] will utter perverse things”).

Foundation of Biblical Metaphors, AIL 31 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 149–72, and Greg Schmidt-Goering’s article in this volume.

³ Prov 31:18: “She perceives [טעם] that her merchandise is profitable” (NRSV). In Job 20:2 חוש stands in parallel to שעפים (“disquieting thoughts”) and thus may mean “feel (pain)” (*CDCH*, s.v. “חוש”; cf. NJPS) rather than “be agitated” (NRSV) or “disturbed” (NIV), lit., “hasten” (ESV; *CDCH*, s.v. “חוש”).

In Prov 23 drunkenness is compared to seasickness; in Ps 107 seasickness is compared to drunkenness. (Perhaps the difference is because the teacher in Prov 23 thinks that his pupils have no personal experience with drunkenness and that it is easier for them to imagine seasickness, whereas the author of Ps 107 thought that his readers were more acquainted with drinking than with seafaring.)

Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;
they saw the deeds of Yahweh,
his wondrous works in the deep.
For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to heaven,
they went down to the depths;
their courage [נפש] melted away in their calamity;
they reeled [חגג] and staggered [נוע] like drunkards,
and were at their wits' end [lit., and their wisdom was ruined].
(Ps 107:23–27, NRSV [modified])

Isaiah accuses priests and prophets of “reeling” (שגה) with wine and “staggering” (תעה) with strong drink, even when they have a vision or give judgment, and vomiting on all tables and in all places (Isa 28:7–8). As in many other cases, it is not clear whether these reproaches are meant literally or figuratively or both. The same is true of Hab 2:15–16:

Alas for you who make your neighbors drink,
pouring out your wrath until they are drunk,
in order to gaze on their nakedness!
You will be sated with contempt instead of glory.
Drink, you yourself, and stagger [רעל N]⁴!
The cup in Yahweh's right hand will come around to you,
and shame will come upon your glory!
(NRSV [modified])

This text takes it for granted that drunk people do not shy away from showing their nakedness and that they stagger—and that both, showing oneself naked and staggering, are dishonorable and degrading behaviors. The accused person humiliated others and therefore will be humiliated by Yahweh in recompense for his evildoing.

⁴ Reading (with the ancient versions) והרעל (*CDCH*, s.v. “רעל I,” N: “stagger, reel”) instead of והערל (*CDCH*, s.v. “ערל,” N: “show the foreskin, i.e. expose oneself, or perh. act as one uncircumcised”); cf. *BHQ*.

Habakkuk 2:15–16 is not the only instance in the Hebrew Bible where Yahweh punishes people by making them drunk and stagger (Isa 19:13–14; 51:17–23; Jer 25:15–28; Zech 12:2–3; Ps 60:3–5; cf. Job 12:24–25) or just by making them stagger (Isa 29:9–10; 1 Kgs 14:15; Deut 32:35) or stumble (Isa 8:14–15; Jer 20:11; 23:12; 46:6; 50:32; Hos 4:5). In these instances, staggering probably has not only the connotation of humiliation, but also of weakness. When Lev 25:35 speaks about a person who “becomes poor” (יָמוּד, from מוֹד) and “whose hand totters” (וּמְטָה יָדוֹ, from מוֹט), it means that the person is too weak to maintain “a minimum of economic independence.”⁵ Accordingly, the participle כּוֹשֵׁל (“stumbling”) sometimes “denotes someone who cannot walk because he has fallen or is exhausted (Isa 5:27; Ps 105:37; Job 4:4; 2 Chr 28:15).” It “can also refer to someone weak with age (Sir 42:8; 1QSa 2:7).”⁶ Likewise, it is a sign that an image of a deity is weak, if one needs “to fasten it with nails so that it will not totter” (לֹא יִמּוֹט: Isa 41:7; cf. Isa 40:20).⁷

Besides seasickness and drunkenness, the Hebrew Bible mentions bearing a heavy load as a cause of losing one’s balance. Thus Isa 24:19–20 describes how

The earth is utterly broken,
the earth is torn asunder,
the earth is violently shaken [מוֹט הַתְּמוֹטָה].
The earth staggers [נוֹעַ תְּנוּעַ] like a drunkard,
it sways [וְהִתְנוּדָה, from נוֹד] like a hut;
its transgression lies heavy upon it,
and it falls, and will not rise again.
(NRSV)

Lamentations 5:13 reports that “boys stagger [כּוֹשֵׁל] under loads of wood” (NRSV). Perhaps another instance is Amos 2:13, if the Hebrew verb עִקַּח H in this context means “make sway.”⁸ Then Yahweh says here:

I will make it sway [מַעִיק] under you,
just as a cart makes sway [תַּעִיק] [those sitting on it?] when it is full of sheaves.

Proverbs 5:18–23 mentions love as another cause of staggering, if one translates the verb שָׁגָה here as “stagger” (which is one of the attested meanings of the verb in Classical Hebrew):

⁵ Arnulf Baumann, “מוֹט,” *TDOT* 8:154.

⁶ Christoph Barth, “כּוֹשֵׁל,” *TDOT* 7:355.

⁷ Baumann, “מוֹט,” 8:156.

⁸ Other possible meanings are “press,” “hinder/be hindered,” “roar/cause a roar,” and “split/make a furrow,” see *DCH*, s.v. “עִקַּח.”

Let your fountain be blessed,
 and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
 a lovely deer,
 a graceful doe.
 May her breasts satisfy you at all times;
 may you stagger [שגה] always by her love.
 Why should you stagger [שגה], my son, by another woman
 and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?
 For human ways are under the eyes of Yahweh,
 and he examines all their paths.
 The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them,
 and they are caught in the toils of their sin.
 They die for lack of discipline,
 and because of their great folly they stagger [שגה].

If this translation is correct, the passage shows that the weakness connoted by staggering is not always assessed as bad.

More tangible causes for losing one's balance in the Hebrew Bible are being struck or thrust (1 Kgs 14:15; Job 12:15; Amos 9:5); stumbling over an obstacle, maybe a hump, a stone, or a corpse (Jer 31:9; 46:12; Nah 3:3); running into a trap (Job 18:7–10); or slipping on greasy ground (Jer 23:12).

“PROPER” AND “FIGURATIVE” MEANINGS

Frequently it is said that the foot, gait, or step of a person, or their knees, hips, or loins, stagger or stumble or slip (בשל, מעד, מוט),⁹ as for instance in Ps 73:2:

my feet had almost stumbled [נטה Gp];
 my steps had nearly slipped [שפד Gp].
 (NRSV)

Should this manner of speaking be understood as *pars pro toto*, the foot representing the whole person? Or is the foot here envisaged as some kind of organ for the sense of balance (like the seeing eye or the hearing ear)?

In view of the Hebrew texts and considering basic theoretical questions of semantics, it appears difficult and problematic to distinguish between a “proper” manner of speaking about balance in the Hebrew Bible and a “figurative” or “metaphorical” one.¹⁰ However, in the majority of cases, it is possible to distinguish texts where it is more or less evident that they talk about balance and its problems in a bodily sense from texts that envisage a broader view of the phenomenon.

⁹ See Barth, “בשל,” 7:354.

¹⁰ Barth, “בשל,” 7:357–58.

There is also a reasonably clear difference between texts that talk about human beings or animals, on the one hand, and those that talk about things like the earth, mountains, a city, a hut, or a wall.

Manners of speaking about balance:

	regarding living beings	regarding inanimate things
in a bodily sense		
in a broader sense		

But even this distinction can be questioned, because it is far from clear that the ancient Hebrews would have agreed with our distinctions between animate and inanimate beings—not to mention that they may have had different conceptions of the body. With these reservations in mind, I shall now briefly and by way of example discuss the different manners of speaking about balance in the Hebrew Bible.

When “boys stagger [כשל] under loads of wood” (Lam 5:13 NRSV), the expression refers fairly unambiguously to problems of living beings who have balance in a bodily sense. The same appears to be true in principle for the following passage from a prophetic oracle:

[God] will raise a signal for a nation far away,
and whistle for a people at the ends of the earth;
Here they come, swiftly, speedily!
None of them is weary, none stumbles [כשל],
none slumbers or sleeps,
not a loincloth is loose,
not a sandal-thong broken;
their arrows are sharp,
all their bows bent,
their horses’ hoofs seem like flint,
and their wheels like the whirlwind.
(Isa 5:26–28 NRSV)

The text sets before the eyes of the readers an image of a strong and well equipped army marching in combat column. None of the soldiers are tired or stumble or sleep in a literary sense. However, the text’s rhetoric is obviously hyperbolic, and the concrete image illustrates the more abstract notion of an unshakeable and irresistible army.

When speakers of psalms utter their confidence that they will not be shaken (Psa 16:8; 30:7; 62:3, 7), their fear that they will stumble (Ps 38:18), or their hope that their enemies will stumble (Ps 27:2; Jer 20:11), they probably do not refer to

tumbling and stumbling in a physical sense, or at least not only in a physical sense but also in a broader sense. In the words of Christoph Barth, the notion of “drastic disaster on the way” can refer more narrowly to concrete “disaster on the road” or more broadly to “disaster in life.”¹¹

The latter is quite obviously true for the way of speaking about the stumbling or the not stumbling of righteous or wicked people, or wise and foolish people, as the following examples from Prov 4 may illustrate:

I have taught you the way of wisdom;
I have led you in the paths of uprightness.
When you walk, your step will not be hampered;
and if you run, you will not stumble [כשל].
(Prov 4:11–12 NRSV)

The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know what they stumble over [כשל].
(Prov 4:19 NRSV)

Even here, a concrete bodily understanding of tumbling and stumbling cannot be excluded completely. Traveling by foot was probably more dangerous in ancient times than today, and injuries caused by stumbling and falling were more threatening for the ancient Hebrews than for us. Nevertheless, it appears quite evident that a broader understanding is more appropriate in this context.

“Disaster on the road” or “in life” can refer to calamity or failure, as in the above examples or in Prov 10:30:

The righteous will never be removed [lit., “will not stagger,” בלי־מוט],
but the wicked will not remain [or “abide,” לא ישכנו־ארץ] in the land.
(NRSV)

However, tumbling, stumbling, or falling on one’s way can also symbolize moral weakness or mistakes, as in the following instances: “I have trusted in Yahweh without wavering [or ‘I will not waver,’ לא אמעֶד]” (Ps 26:1 NRSV). More clearly:

My feet had almost stumbled [or: slipped: נטה Gp];
my steps had nearly slipped [שפך Dp].
For I was envious of the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
(Ps 73:2–3 NRSV)

¹¹ Barth, “כשל,” 7:358.

Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain
are the righteous who give way [lit., “stagger,” מַט] before the wicked.
(Prov 25:26 NRSV)

But my people have forgotten me,
they burn offerings to a delusion;
they have stumbled in their ways, in the ancient roads,
and have gone into bypaths, not the highway.
(Jer 18:15 NRSV)

The loss of balance—in a narrower or in a broader sense—can affect not only an individual being but also a collective (see Amos 8:12) like Israel and/or Judah and/or Jerusalem (1 Kgs 14:5; Isa 3:8; 8:14; 51:17, 22), cities (Amos 4:8), kingdoms (Ps 46:7), Egypt (Isa 19:13), one or more other nations (Ps 60:5; Jer 18:15; 25:16; Zech 12:2), or the whole world (Ps 99:1).

Examples of inanimate beings tumbling and/or stumbling in a bodily sense are a cart (Amos 2:13), a hut (Isa 24:20), Mount Zion (Ps 125:1), and the city of God (Ps 46:6). In the latter two instances one may ask whether the meaning is concrete and bodily or broader and more abstract.

The same is true for the following examples speaking of the balance or imbalance of the earth:

[God] has established the world;
it shall never be moved [or “shaken,” מוֹט N].
(Ps 93:1 NRSV)

[He] set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken [מוֹט N].
(Ps 104:5 NRSV)

[He] looks on the earth and it trembles [רָעַד],
[he] touches the mountains and they smoke.
(Ps 104:32 NRSV)

It appears that according to Ps 104 the earth will never “be shaken” (מוֹט N), but it may “tremble” (רָעַד). In Ps 104 it is only God who is able to make the earth tremble, whereas in Ps 75 God leaves open who makes the earth totter:

When the earth totters [מוֹג N], with all its inhabitants,
it is I who keep its pillars steady [תִּבֵּן D].
(Ps 75:4 NRSV)

The three psalms agree that the stability of the world is the work of God.

Complementary to the picture of God as guarantor of the stability of a well-ordered world is the picture of God as the one who throws an unjust and corrupted world off balance, as in the following examples:

The earth reeled [געש] and rocked [רעש];
the foundations of the heavens trembled [רגז] and quaked [געש HtD],
because he was angry.
(2 Sam 22:8 = Ps 18:8 NRSV)

You have caused the land to quake [רעש H];
you have torn it open;
repair the cracks in it, for it is tottering [מוט].
(Ps 60:4 NRSV)

The pillars of heaven tremble [or “shake,” רפף Lp],
and are astounded at his rebuke.
(Job 26:11 NRSV)

Yahweh is king; let the peoples tremble [רגז]!
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim;
let the earth quake [or “shake,” גוט]!
(Ps 99:1 NRSV)

According to Ps 46, the city of God is an island of stability in a world out of balance:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
though the earth should change [מור H],¹²
though the mountains shake [מוט] in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble [רעש] with its tumult ...
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city;
it shall not be moved [or “shaken,” מוט N];
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar,
the kingdoms totter [מוט];
he utters his voice,

¹² Reading והמור (or והמר) instead of והמיר (*CDCH*, s.v. “מור I,” H: “change, alter”) one could also translate “though the earth should quake/shake” (*CDCH*, s.v. “מור II,” N); cf. NJPS: “though the earth reels.”

the earth melts.
 Yahweh of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our refuge.
 (Ps 46:1–7 NRSV)

Isaiah 54 takes the view that God is more stable than the world:

For the mountains may depart [מוֹשׁ]
 and the hills be removed [or “stagger,” מוֹט],
 but my steadfast love shall not depart [מוֹשׁ] from you,
 and my covenant of peace shall not be removed [or “stagger,” מוֹט],
 says Yahweh, who has compassion on you.
 (Isa 54:10 NRSV)

Here the notion of imbalance refers to an abstract entity, Yahweh’s covenant of peace, like truth in Isa 59:

Justice is turned back,
 and righteousness stands at a distance;
 for truth stumbles [כָּשַׁל] in the public square,
 and uprightness cannot enter.
 (Isa 59:14 NRSV)

CONCLUSION

This brief and preliminary review of the sense of balance in the Hebrew Bible brings me to the following conclusion: the sense of balance is a matter of some consequence for the worldview of the Hebrew Bible. In the culture expressed or construed by this corpus of writings, balance and stability are highly valued. For individual humans, it was important not to tumble or stumble (see above), or not to fall if they did stumble (Ps 37:23–24), or to stand up again if they have fallen (Prov 24:16). Ideally, righteous, wise, and pious people should not tumble and stumble, whereas the wicked and the enemies should do so (Prov 10:30). If other people stumble and fall down, solidarity demanded that the righteous help them stand up again (Lev 25:35; Isa 35:3; Job 4:4; 12:5).

Also in the broader view of the world, stability and balance were fundamental for a good order and well-being. When the gods do not care for justice, “all the foundations of the earth are shaken” (Ps 82:5 NRSV). In view of such disturbances of balance and stability, Yahweh is expected to secure or restore equilibrium. However, there are also texts that see the world as stable but deeply corrupted. From this point of view, the only hope may be that God will shake the earth and throw the corrupt structures out of balance.

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